

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 3rd February 2019
1 Corinthians 13: 1 - 13

When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things.¹

I remember a geography teacher on my first day of first year at secondary school quoting these words to me and my class from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a part of which we read this morning. It was the first thing he said that day – he just walked in to the room and dramatically pronounced them. They have stuck in my mind ever since.

At the time, I had to really think about what it was he was trying to say to us school children in first year of secondary school. Was he trying to make a point about behaviour and diligence; now that we were big boys and girls had left primary school and were now in the big school we should behave like big boys and girls, and knuckle down to hard work.

But, I think that event has stuck in my mind also because there was something about it that disturbed me. I had, I think, back then, and have now, a nagging sense that along with saying that what was appropriate in primary school is no longer appropriate here in secondary school, the force of these words also implied that those past primary school days were of lesser value in some way to those we were living now, in secondary school; who we had been just a few months ago, wasn't as important as who we were now; what we had learned then was nothing compared to what we were about to learn in the big school.

That implication seemed unfair to me. It seemed to write off who I had been, all that I had done, all that I had learned as if it was of lesser value, or just a prelude for something greater, and that seemed to deny me something of myself. Surely primary school had been real, full, important, and all that I had done and been there was of complete value in and of itself, rather than a mere preparation for the future.

When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things.

Years later, I know now that it is not surprising I felt this way about these words from this book of the Bible, because Paul who wrote them has always been accused of not valuing the lives we lead in this world compared to the life we will lead in the world to come, "Now," he writes, "we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. My knowledge now is only partial; then it will be whole."²

¹ 1 Cor 13: 11b – 12a

² 1 Cor 13: 12

Reading words such as these, and others in this letter and other letters that Paul wrote, it is not difficult to conclude that Paul believed that this world was about to pass away, and that a new world would come in which Believers would live spiritual lives of divine fullness; the life we live now is nothing compared to the life in store for us after our deaths.

The accusation levelled against Paul is that he didn't value this world, or our lives lived in this world, and that he understood them as nothing but a prelude for something greater, something more significant. The aim of our lives that we live now is to use them as preparation for the life to come and to ensure that we enter in to the life to come in the next world.

Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see face to face.

But, this accusation that is levelled against Paul - that he doesn't care for our lives lived in this world, and only for our lives lived in the next world - is unfair. It is unfair because so many of his letters were written precisely because he was *deeply* concerned with the lives of congregations such as that in Corinth, and the people who made them up.

This first letter to the church in Corinth was written because the church and the members of it were divided over how they should worship, what they should value, who was important, and they were having a terrible time; they were very upset. Paul's letters were genuinely concerned for their wellbeing in this world. Even if he did believe that this world was merely the prelude to a better world, Paul nevertheless cared deeply about the lives people led in this world. If he didn't, why would he go to so much trouble to write so many demanding letters to them?

There's no doubt that Paul cared for life lived now. But, having said that, there is also no doubt that he believed that in our lives lived now we do not see or understand fully the nature of this world, of who we are, or of what the universe is. In the 21st century that belief has become pretty mainstream. We know today that what we know and understand about ourselves and the universe is only partial and deeply subjective. We know much, but the more we discover, the more we realise how little we know. We are constrained by our own perception of the world and our own presence in the universe.

We don't even know for sure what is illusion and what is real. At six years old, Aidan my son, still asks from time to time – as he has been asking ever since he could speak - when we are out and about doing something, “Daddy, is this a dream – or is this real?” When I tell him it is real, he asks how do I know, and I struggle to find an answer, for as Paul says, “My knowledge now is partial.” How can you be sure this isn't just a dream?

But there is even more to be said in Paul's defence than just that despite his belief in a world to come, he was nevertheless right to recognise that we know and understand this world and our lives only partially. For all that he asserted that belief in his letters, he also argued that there is something in this world which we do understand fully, something that we can know as it really is, something that is not only part of the fabric of this present world, but is also part of the world to come, something that is eternal – love.

“Love,” he says exists in this world now, but unlike everything else that exists in this world now, it “will never come to an end.” In this world, in our lives the most important and significant thing to feel, to understand, to appreciate is love. The only thing that we can be sure of he says, the only thing that will continue, is love. Everything else will pass away, but love will endure.

That love is the thing that goes to the very heart of who we are and is the only thing that persists beyond our lives in this world is something I recognise often when I am with the families of people whose funeral I am taking, and compare what they say to the eulogies you read or hear of the famous when they die.

If you read obituaries in newspapers or listen to them on the radio or TV of famous people who have died what is eulogised is what these people achieved in their lives, and what they contributed to the world and our society: academics, for example, are eulogised for their knowledge; politicians for their achievements; actors and singers for their silvery tongues; sports people for their terrific ability with a ball or a tennis racket or whatever.

At the end of the lives of the rich or famous what endures about them in the public memory is most often confined to what they did. But, that is only because the public don't know these famous people personally. In fact, as soon as we get to know someone personally our appreciation of what they do in life starts to be overshadowed by our appreciation – or not – of who they are, of what kind of people they are.

When someone famous dies we hear a lot about what that person did, but when a radio or TV presenter speaks to someone who knew that famous person personally – a friend or a colleague, the conversation quickly turns from their great acting, or their wonderful songs, or their academic achievements, or their wonderful career or how many trophies that person one, to who that person was, what he or she was like, what kind of personality they had.

At the end of our lives, when all is said and done, there is always a sense that although what we did in life, what we achieved, is important, it pales in comparison to what kind of people we were; what kind of relationships we sought to form with others.

To those who know us, it is who we were, not what we did that endures beyond our deaths in their memories; it is what kind of people we were in life that is

significant, not how much we earned, or how tuneful our voices, or how brilliant our minds – these things all pass away. At the end of our lives, what endures in the minds of those who know us is not how much we earned or how big our house was, but how much we loved – or didn't love.

It is as if everything we do or achieve or learn about this world passes away, and the only thing that truly remains is something of ourselves that was known by others. When we know someone, at the end of the day when all is said and done, what lasts, what is important to us, is not how much that person achieved in this world, but how much he or she loved, and how much we loved them; that is what remains in our hearts and in our minds – when we know someone.

Paul wrote, "My knowledge is only partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me." You are known. You are known by God, wholly, not partially; fully, not just a bit of you. So, what matters to God, about you, is only, wholly, how much you love in this world, for it is that, and only that, which will endure, which matters.

You are known by God, and therefore the only thing that matters, that lasts, is his love for you. At the end of the day, that is what matters, that is what lasts, that is what is eternal, that is what will never pass away. Everything else in our lives will pass away, but what will remain in the hearts of those who know us is the love we showed or didn't show. And what remains forever, even when we are all gone, is the love that God, who knows us, has for each one of us. That is eternal.